



A BLOG BY
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CHURCH & CULTURE

Church Attendance Patterns Are Changing And We Have To Adapt

It's not enough be an attractional church, a caring church, or even a teaching church. We need to become an equipping church.

Karl Vaters

May 2, 2018



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Church attendance is changing.

As recently as 20 years ago, if ten people became church members (either formally or informally) the average attendance grew by eight or nine people.

Not any more.

Today, if ten people become church members, average attendance grows by five or six.

Here's why.

According to Thom Rainer, "About 20 years ago, a church member was considered active in the church if he or she attended three times a week. Today, a church member is considered active in the church if he or she attends three times a month." In many places, it's even lower than that.

These are not fringe people who are attending that infrequently. And these are not folks who have quit going to church. This is the pattern for *active* church members.

There are many reasons for this phenomenon, of course, as Thom Rainer goes on to explain in [this post](#). Carey Nieuwhof has a different, but also helpful take on why this is happening in a series that starts with [this article](#).

Since they've covered the "why?" so well, I'm not going to try to add to it. Instead, I want to make a couple observations about what it means for the average church.

More Members, Fewer Attenders

First, since it's harder to increase your average attendance numbers than it used to be, our Sunday service attendance patterns are a less valuable metric for measuring church health than ever. And they were never the be-all, end-all metric for that to begin with.

Sunday service attendance patterns are a less valuable metric for measuring church health than ever.

It's always been a common thing for pastors to say something like this to each other: "We have 100 people on an average Sunday. But if everyone showed up we'd probably have 150!"

That was true twenty years ago. Today, it could be as many as 200 or more.

But remember, those 200+ people are active and committed to the church. Because of this, they expect to be pastored just like they were when they attended two to three times a week.

We also know that when people attend less often they give less often (even with online giving options). So even a church with a flat attendance pattern is ministering to more people with less access and fewer resources.

We can complain about this, or we can adapt to it.

Aligning Our Structures With Our Theology

Which leads to my second observation. We have to change our church structures.

Theologically we know that the pastor's Prime Mandate (along with four other types of church leaders) is to equip the saints to do the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). But our structures are set up to give them the expectation that the pastor will do the work of ministry *for* them.

We might have been able to pull this off in an era when people were around the church more often. It's much easier to pastor someone that you're seeing three times a week. But when you only see them two or three times a month, the word "pastoring" has to take on a different meaning.

Our church structures and pastoral expectations must come in line with our theology.

Our church structures and pastoral expectations must come in line with our theology.

It's no longer enough (it never was) to be an attractional church, an entertaining church, a caring church, or even a teaching church.

We need to become an equipping church.

When we have so little of people's time and attention, we must make the best of it.

Training, mentoring, discipling and equipping must be Job One. And not just in small groups and discipleship classes. It needs to become the focus of our main Sunday services.

This won't be easy. But it is necessary.

And the rewards will be worth it.

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